

The **Herbert W. Plimpton** Collection of Realist Art



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The **Herbert W. Plimpton** Collection of Realist Art

18th Annual
Patrons and Friends
Exhibition

Rose Art Museum

Brandeis University

Waltham
Massachusetts

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On the cover:

Sarah Supplee
New Hampshire, Route 93, I
1978
oil on canvas
44 1/4 x 66 1/2 inches

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Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to the following persons for their active involvement with the Plimpton Collection and their support for this publication: Lois Foster and the Patrons and Friends of the Rose Art Museum; the Trustees of the Herbert W. Plimpton Foundation: Frank G. Allen, Jr., Oriole Farb Feshback, Wayne Johnson, W. Robert Mill,

and Lewis G. Pollock; the Plimpton Foundation Advisory Board: R. Anne McCarthy, Herbert W. Plimpton, Jr., Frances P. Pugh, and Gabriella P. Ressler; my colleagues at the Rose Art Museum: Roger Kizik, John Rexine, Susan Stoops, and Corinne Zimmermann; and my wife Barbara, who shared fully my friendship with Herbert W. Plimpton.

Carl Belz
Henry and Lois Foster Director

Introduction

I was introduced to Herbert W. Plimpton by Sunne Savage at the opening of a retrospective exhibition of paintings by James Weeks that took place at the Rose Art Museum in the spring of 1978. He returned to the show several times and bought two of the pictures, and that's how my relationship to his collection began. It wasn't the first time he had collected art for he had acquired 19th-century American pictures during the 1960s, assembling a collection that he subsequently gave to the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College in honor of his father, Hollis W. Plimpton, a 1915 alumnus.

As I came to know and work with Herbert Plimpton, I learned that his ambition was not merely to accumulate pictures but to build a collection. This meant his acquisitions were to have a focus, and that focus was provided by realism, which during the 1970s had generated widespread attention within the larger fabric of contemporary American art, particularly in its new form of photorealism. Mr. Plimpton valued tradition—he was keenly interested in the history of art—but he also respected innovation—he liked having his eye challenged—and realism best enabled him to pursue both interests.

In addition to having a focus, building a collection meant having a purpose, and Mr. Plimpton's purpose was educational. He envisioned a teaching collection housed eventually at a college

or university museum where his realist pictures would interact with other kinds of contemporary expression and be available to students learning to make art and studying its history. His contemporary collection would thus be a counterpart to his 19th-century collection—its grandchild, he called it—and realism would connect them. Accordingly, he and I agreed to interpret realism broadly, wanting to reveal its connection to the issues that generally define the art of our time and its relationship to a wide range of attitudes in older art as well.

In preparing the essays that follow, I have tried to highlight those current and historical issues and attitudes in relation to particular paintings, my hope being that an overview of contemporary realism will accrue to the reading of the individual texts rather than being outlined in advance of encountering them. The texts need not be read in the alphabetical order of their presentation here, for each is intended to be a self-contained entity. With realism we are sometimes content with identifying the image or admiring the artist's technique, but there is always more at stake. My responses to the paintings represent personal explorations of what the stakes might consist of, and their aim is to encourage the reader to engage

similar paths toward meaning. An additional hope for the essays is that they will heighten awareness of the sheer pleasure of looking at art, the kind of pleasure Herbert Plimpton experienced while acquiring his pictures, and I experienced while writing about them.

Herbert Plimpton died of leukemia in the fall of 1981 at the age of 52. From the start of our relationship, he placed his acquisitions here at the Rose Art Museum on an extended loan basis, and for a year prior to his illness he worked to establish a foundation that would have ownership of his collection until he decided upon its final destination. That trust came into being shortly before his premature death, and the Herbert W. Plimpton Foundation then became located at the Museum. In this setting the pictures belonging to the Foundation were highly active. We regularly included them in exhibitions of our permanent collection of contemporary art, we loaned them to exhibitions at other institutions throughout the United States and abroad, and we made them available on an ongoing basis to students and scholars in the field. That pattern continued until 1993 when I recommended to the Trustees of the Foundation that the trust be dissolved and the pictures gifted to Brandeis University. My wish was that the Plimpton Collection would remain intact in perpetuity in the setting where it had grown and vitally interacted. With the Trustees' unanimous consent, that wish was generously satisfied, and the Museum's collection was accordingly enriched.

CB

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Words and Images

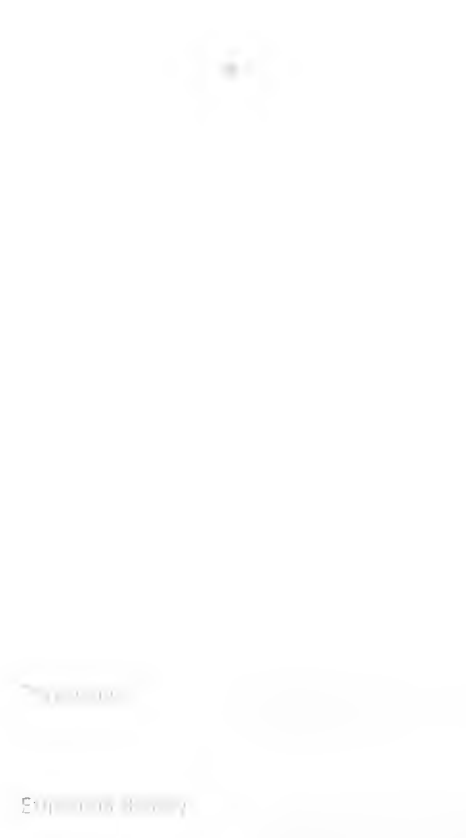
<http://www.archive.org/details/herbertwplimpton00rose>



Herbert Plimpton responded intuitively to realism, preferring it to New York School abstraction any day, but what does that single fact tell us about him as a person? That he was a practical man, a realist, so to speak, someone who preferred fact over fiction? We must tread cautiously in our inclination—though a natural inclination it is—to locate the collector in his collection. After all, there are many realisms here, many ways of seeing the world and relating to it; they add up to a ramified taste that reflects a complex person whom I personally would not wish to characterize in any reductive or singular way. Having had the privilege of knowing him, however, I naturally see certain aspects of his person more immediately reflected in some of the pictures he collected than I do in others. Herbert Plimpton was, for instance, a fastidious man, a man who subscribed to the old saying, “A place for everything and everything in its place,” a man who appreciated everything being properly set forth, the i’s all carefully dotted, the t’s all neatly crossed. When he joined us for tree trimming one year, he was somewhat disarmed by our nonhierarchical dispersal of the ornaments, for he was accustomed to arranging them

in order, the large ones at the bottom of the tree giving way to the small ones at the top. Another time, when he was about to fly to London on business, I asked him if he might find for me there an umbrella longer than the ones I found in Boston. I would have to accompany him, he said, in order to be accurately measured.

William Bailey’s still life is nothing if not fastidious, the bowls and cups and pitchers precisely arranged according to height and mass, color and texture, their delicate spacing creating a gentle rhythm from left to right, right to left. There is nothing casual about the presentation, but it is much more than fastidious. The drawer in the table on which the objects are placed has no knobs or handles, it yields reluctantly, if at all, to the flux of any everyday use. In their emphatic horizontal deployment, as in the warm and glowing light that surrounds them, the objects themselves assume dignified stability, suggesting, as Mark Strand has observed, not so much an ordinary still life as a capacious landscape clustered with stately buildings, lovingly cultivated and enduring. The background wall, an unbroken expanse of rich brown pigment, also suggests the fertile earth; notice how ample it is as it stretches beyond the picture frame, as if without limit, imparting to the objects a timeless monumentality. Fastidious? Yes, and a quality of the collector that those of us who knew him appreciated as exemplary of gentlemanly decorum. But those other qualities elicited here, the warmth and dignity, the atmosphere of civilized intelligence and abundant feeling, those we not only appreciated but at the same time valued deeply. I see here an especially personal reflection of Herbert W. Plimpton.



William Bailey
 Still Life
 1950s
 Oil on canvas
 18 x 24 inches



Gianfranco Still Life

1978
oil on canvas
44⁷/₈ x 57¹/₂ inches

While few among us have made paintings or sculptures, nearly all of us have made photographs. Think for a moment about the implications of that. Compared to paintings and sculptures, there are literally millions upon millions of photographs in the world, likely a few hundred in my house alone. So many photographs have we taken that it's been suggested that any one of us might by sheer luck of the draw have come up with a masterpiece, like winning the lottery. Unlike playing the lottery and fantasizing we might win, however, we don't take photographs in the hope of coming up with a masterpiece or with the idea of making art at all; we take them to document children's birthdays, holiday gatherings, summer vacations, the weekend we spent in Santa Barbara. They're far more casual than artworks, which accounts for our calling them snapshots, as it accounts for our relationship to them, more often than not neglecting to date them—When did we stay at that motel?—and stuffing them into shoe boxes that we stack in the closet until we want to retrieve or verify a memory.

Robert Bechtle understands the context of the snapshot and its aesthetic: "I try to avoid composing too much, trying instead for a kind of 'real estate photo' look... I try for a kind of neutrality or transparency of style that minimizes any artfulness that might prevent the viewer from responding directly to the subject matter. My interest in these subjects has nothing

to do with satire or social comment as some people have supposed. I paint them because they are a part of what I know and as such I have an affection for them; I am interested in their commonness and in the challenge of making art from such ordinary fare."

The challenge of making art from ordinary fare runs throughout modern art and mirrors the nonhierarchical character of modern experience generally. Unlike the days when a battle scene by definition qualified for greater artistic significance than a still life painting, no subject in modern expression is guaranteed or denied significance in advance of its being presented to us in a particular work—not a battle, not a still life, not a snapshot of a woman seated on a motel patio. So, Bechtle paints the everyday world for which he feels affection, and we presume he took the snapshot that led to this painting after emptying the abandoned coffee cup depicted in it. But why would he want his painting to *look* like a photograph, as though it weren't painted at all? Maybe he wanted to confront photography, return the challenge that photography is said to have presented to painting when it was invented, demonstrate by expert technique that he could make a painting as "real" as any photograph. Maybe, for pride in craft can never be dismissed lightly. Or maybe he wanted to co-opt photography by securing for painting the credibility we attach to photographs, the immediacy of their subjects, the conviction that those subjects were of the world at a particular time and place. To make paintings objective, like truths, has long been a goal in art, and Bechtle's photorealism shows us his strategy for achieving it.



Santa Larva Motel

1977
oil on canvas
48.6 x 69 inches

William Beckman

William Beckman's primary vehicle of expression has always been the human figure, which he invariably paints from direct observation, employing memory or the aid of drawings only during interim stages of a picture's development when his model may not be available. It's a painstaking process, and a major painting typically requires a year or more to bring to completion, its gestation often extended by radical changes that a composition demands along the way toward its final resolution. A standing nude may have begun as a seated figure fully clothed, there may have been still life objects in the space or a window in the background, and the initial color of the ground itself may have been completely altered. The process is further lengthened by the artist's practice of repeatedly scraping, sanding, and repainting the picture surface, layering his oils, and deepening their color until both space and figure become palpable visual phenomena whose respective identities have been fully articulated. Beckman's method in turn heightens the confrontational impact of his image, giving the impression that it has been sculpted out of pigment and so projects itself assertively into our space.

Double Nude images a male/female couple, marking Beckman's first investigation of what has become a recurring theme in his art. Here the figures face us, hands joined, standing before a pale green wall on which their shadows are cast by natural light entering from the upper left corner of the painting—the space they occupy otherwise abstract, emptied of worldly objects. The male/female relationship seems initially straightforward and unproblematic,

its presentation youthful and romantic. The vision is Edenic in its compositional echo of Durer's *Adam and Eve*, graphic in its stylistic recollection of the Northern Renaissance masters from whom the artist initially learned his trade. A series of discordant notes nonetheless tempers the relationship and projects its historicized, otherworldly appearance into the here and now. The figures are tense, their expressions separately questioning us as if we had intruded on them. While the male stops us with his gaze, the female looks past us, as if at someone behind our right shoulder, provoking us to do the same and to take upon ourselves the couples' own anxieties. That the encounter is confrontational is evident in the figures' clasped hands, an awkward claw-like tangle of lines indicating less that they are willingly joined than that he has impulsively grabbed her in response to the threat we pose. An undercurrent in the relationship is revealed here: male and female seem equal, but he assumes a dominant role when they meet us as a couple. His challenge is as forthright as his attention is fixed; she yields reluctantly, more reserved, and her identity, like the object of her concern, is less specified and accessible. In the moment these people meet the world they become individuals, and their paradise becomes conditional.

Beckman's is a trenchant realism that celebrates the richness of the world viewed—look, you can count the hairs on the figures' heads, note the articulation of all the bones and muscles, see the way flesh absorbs and reflects light. More than that, however, you can encounter and know these figures as human beings. You can confront them as you confront yourself—and then the viewed world becomes the lived world.



Double Nude

1978
oil on birch panel
59 1/2 x 55 1/2 inches

Waltham, Massachusetts, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University.
Herbert W. Plimpton Collection of Realist Art, 1982.
Waltham, Massachusetts, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University.
William Beckman and Gregory Gillespie, 1984, (catalog by Carl Belz) cat. no. 10, p. 28, illus. (traveled to La Jolla, California, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art) Amherst, Massachusetts, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College.
An American Collector: Herbert W. Plimpton, 1989.
Waltham, Massachusetts, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University.
Body Language. The Figure in the Art of Our Time, 1990
Orlando, Florida, Orlando Museum of Art, *Exquisite Paintings*, 1991

Robert Cottingham

Poetry of the street, urban poetry, poetry in neon and metal, fast, fragmented poetry that competes aggressively for our attention while we're on the go: BEER, DELI, ICE, GIRLS, TATTOO, PEPSI, DISCOUNT STORE. Cottingham absorbed this aesthetic while growing up in the city, and he learned its workings as the art director of a New York/Los Angeles advertising firm in the 1960s, before he decided to become a painter. As he says, "My interest in these commercial curiosities seems to derive from my Brooklyn upbringing, my fascination with letter forms as symbols, and my interest in the use of language as a means of persuasion... I like to think of... my work in general as a celebration of the signs and urban iconography that have given American cities their peculiar energy. Monumental, poignant, absurd, and surreal, these structures stand as vivid testimony to the vitality and variety of contemporary American life."

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The celebration of popular culture by fine art has a full 20th-century history, but it is equated in our time most notably with Pop Art and the 1960s, with Andy Warhol's soup cans, Roy Lichtenstein's comics, James Rosenquist's billboards, and Robert

Indiana's words. Cool and detached emotionally, but at the same time visually charged and assaultive, Pop took inspiration from commercial art and challenged it with its own brand of high voltage, in-your-face imagery. Like Robert Cottingham, a number of our Pop artists worked in the commercial sector prior to abandoning it, which helps to explain some of their shared interests, not simply with respect to subject matter, but in terms of formal issues as well. Thus, *Discount Store* blasts us with lights and messages from the business world, and its surface is everywhere clean and impersonal, not painted by hand, it seems, but manufactured. Its form and content are bonded for maximum punch.

This is not to say that Cottingham is a Pop artist, only that the brash sensibility we associate with the 1960s was as pervasive as it is ongoing. Accordingly, this urban landscape is not so much ironic as it is disorienting. Looking at the signs, we account for and comprehend easily enough the "DISCOUNT STORE" of the picture's title, but the other signs are more radically cropped, their information too partial to decipher. A "KA" nestles teasingly in the lower righthand corner, a cryptic "ENS" slashes diagonally across the center of the picture, and around the truncated words steel grates and their dramatic shadows wildly crisscross one another and create a sense of vertigo. So realistic, even photographic, yet so elusive, even abstract. In the grip of these contradictory experiences, we begin to understand what the artist means when he refers to these commercial curiosities as absurd and surreal and, speaking of surrealism, maybe even wonder if our new information highway will lead to another Tower of Babel.

Provenance

Exhibition History



Discount Store

1970
oil on canvas
78 x 78 inches

Linda Etcoff

As is her practice, Linda Etcoff carefully planned this picture before executing it from direct observation. This means she selected and arranged the trays and glassware, the Edward Hopper poster, the lemon, the umbrella, the cup and saucer, the ashtray and cigarettes, the flowers and vase and table, everything, even the colors of the walls and window. She selected them with the idea of creating a decorative ensemble to which each object would appropriately contribute in terms of design and color. Thus, not just any ashtray or pack of cigarettes would do, only the *right* ones, and thus, too, if the studio wall was initially white but the ensemble she envisioned called for blue, then she would repaint the wall before proceeding to paint the painting of it. In the painting itself the artist's refined taste and scrupulous attention to detail are fully apparent in the crisp and exacting depiction of the objects and in the harmonious visual bouquet of their arrangement. We are presented here with a high order of decoration.

Of course the painting is more than just decorative, more than just an attractive still life, a poster announcing the exhibition of an esteemed American master, and a view of the city outside the artist's studio. Let's look again. A table with two trays and a vase of tulips stands in the immediate foreground; behind it on the right is a wall on which the poster is taped, and behind that wall is the studio window with a stool and still life before it. But wait: the window is not actually a window, nor are the stool and still life actually a stool and still life. They are parts of another painting, another Linda Etcoff painting that rests on an easel that stands behind the wall that stands behind the foreground table in the painting we're actually looking at. So we have three paintings in one, not to mention three levels of reality: first, the painting we're addressing, *Still Life with "Chop Suey"*; second, the unnamed painting on the easel in *Still Life with "Chop Suey"*; and third, the Etcoff painting of the Hopper painting reproduced in the poster, the title of which is *Chop Suey*. Paintings of paintings and of reproductions of paintings, art coming from art, as we know all art does. In this case, however, I want to say that that dictum lies at the heart of the painting, animates it throughout, constitutes its theme. Etcoff develops her art out of her own past, but equally she develops it out of the art of artists such as Edward Hopper, and thereby does she extend the tradition of American realist painting. In openly acknowledging all of this, finally, she also—and notably—expands it. A high order of decoration is invariably as meaningful as it is satisfying.





Still Life with Chop Suey

1985
oil on canvas
44 x 60 inches

When I look at paintings I sometimes imagine them as jigsaw puzzles, and try to determine what kind of perceptual and organizational challenges they'd present if they were cut up into 500 distinct pieces randomly distributed on the dining room table. This exercise started in 1964 when I actually worked the puzzle of a Jackson Pollock drip painting called *Convergence*. Believe me, it was a whole new ball game in the world of jigsaw puzzles. As kids, we usually did puzzles by staking out territories, one of us selecting the red pieces that would make the woman's dress, another the green pieces for the tree on the right side of the picture, and so forth, each of us assembling a section of the image that would eventually be linked to the whole. With the Pollock, however, that traditional strategy didn't work, because each piece contained red and green and, it seemed, every other color that made up the picture, which meant the pieces had to be selected on the basis of shape rather than color, and that the whole became formed not by sections but by small individual units, 500 of them. It was a memorable lesson in understanding the overallness for which the drip

paintings are specifically celebrated and in comprehending the mandate that is applied to modern art-making generally, namely, that every part of a painting should carry as much significance as every other part, no leftovers, no mere fillers.

I know you're going to say my lessons stemmed from the fact that Pollock's painting contains no woman or tree, that it's abstract, and the situation is different in the case of realist art where we are presented with discrete recognizable objects. To that I respond: Look at this painting by Janet Fish and apply the jigsaw puzzle test. We see at close range an assortment of glasses on a counter before a window opening onto a view of the city skyline. The glasses are clean and shiny, each sporting a molded or cut design, each reflecting the glasses around it or a fragment of the larger environment. It's a wild image with all those darting lines and intersecting reflections of light, yet we have no difficulty comprehending it, and in this sense it is realistic. But imagine it now as a puzzle. Yes, the city view could be worked as a section, but the puzzle would otherwise be a real challenge, so many pieces with the same marks and colors; it could require more than a few hours to complete.

Periodically in these essays, realist artists are quoted or referred to as being deeply influenced by Abstract Expressionism, insofar as they are more concerned with formal issues than they are with subject matter. The same might be said of Janet Fish, but what does that actually mean? With this painting, I want to say it means she was influenced by Pollock in learning the importance of overallness in relation to modern pictorial integrity, just as I was.



Spring Evening

1977
oil on canvas
44 x 61 inches

Frances Cohen Gillespie

I am reminded that the first time I saw a real live bird-of-paradise flower was the first time I visited Southern California. Before that I had only seen plastic ones, and they naturally fascinated me because they were so exotic and weirdly sexual, resembling male/female genitalia, gaudy purple and orange and yellow flowers with blue tongues sticking out. What turned out to be even more weird, however, was the fact that the growing flowers felt to the touch as if they were made of plastic; they didn't resemble a living substance at all. As such, they became for me a symbol of Los Angeles culture, a surreal world in which you can never be sure what is plastic and what is not.

I seriously doubt that Frances Cohen Gillespie was thinking specifically about Los Angeles when she painted *Penny's Kimono*, but the picture nonetheless convinces me that she fully understands the ways in which the world can be a surreal place. The bird-of-paradise flowers may be exotic in themselves, but their presentation here makes them seem fantastic. Described by attenuated linear arabesques, they unsettlingly appear to move, as if in the midst of a ritual dance. The twisting design of the glass vase also seems alive, like a writhing torso, and the

kimono tablecloth teems with clouds and dragons swirling constantly about in apparent confusion. In stark contrast, the space in which the table and flowers are placed is utterly still. The room is airless and otherwise empty—except for the mirror, but even the mirror is disturbing. Hanging on a wall that is exactly parallel to the picture surface, it should reflect more than it does—us, for instance, or in any case the artist herself, for she had to be directly in front of it in order to see the motif as she has rendered it. On one level, everything about this picture is convincingly knowable, for everything is precisely and objectively described, but on another level everything is obsessive, eerie, and mysterious. Somewhere between those two levels, reality drifts into surreality, and in wondering where that somewhere is, we grasp the picture's magic.

Surrealism was formed in Paris in the 1920s and played a formative role in the development of the New York School in the 1940s, but it was generally dismissed during the following two decades in favor of the purer abstraction that dominated art at the time. Laced with dream and fantasy, haunting narration, and an intense awareness that "reality" is rarely what it seems, Surrealism was anything but pure, so its chapter in the history of art was closed. Beginning in the 1970s, however, artists such as Frances Cohen Gillespie reopened it, and they did so not so much by studying the historical movement and the theories on which it was founded, but by absorbing and giving expression to their everyday experience of American culture, for that's where Surrealism went when it died as a movement. Go to LA and you'll see. Better yet, just look into the mirror in *Penny's Kimono*.

Provenance

Exhibition History



Penelope, 1977

1977
oil and egg tempera
on birch plywood
60 1/2 x 54 inches

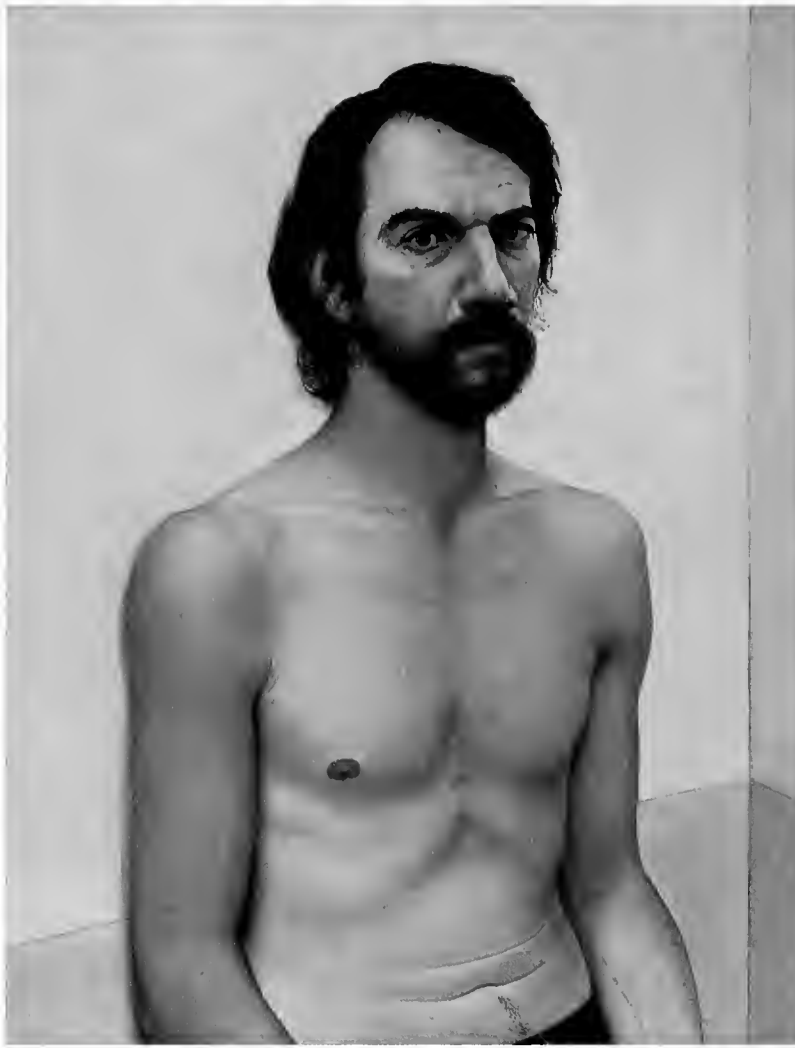
Durham, North Carolina, Center
University Museum of Art, *Penelope*
of Frances Gillespie, 1984,
Springfield, Massachusetts
Museum of Fine Arts, *Art Collection*
Frances Gillespie, 1989
Amherst, Massachusetts
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College
An American Collector:
Herbert W. Plimpton, 1989,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard
and Robert Rothscchild Gallery
Mary Ingraham Bunting
Institute, Radcliffe College
Cohen Gillespie Paintings
1993, cat. no. 3.

Gregory Gillespie

Only in the popular imagination, and with the exception of self-consciously nihilistic programs such as Dadaism, have modern and contemporary art wanted to shun art's past, clear the deck, create something new for newness' sake. More accurately, the artists of our time, like their predecessors, have found in the history of art an ongoing challenge to be confronted and personalized, thereby locating themselves within its fabric while at the same time shaping it. Generally, that challenge has been provided by the more recent than the more distant past. Given the fact that 20th-century vanguard art has been largely dominated by abstraction, however, painters with realist ambitions have often had to look to premodern art for models on which to ground and develop their work. Such is the case with Gregory Gillespie, who lived in Italy from 1962 until 1970, and who took inspiration from the Northern and Italian Renaissance masters he saw there and in his travels around Europe. Here is his acknowledgment of the experience: "It was fantastic... I went to art school in New York City—there was the Met. Or the Frick. But I wasn't really ready for them. After working in Italy for a few years, I started to become technically competent enough so that the impact

of how they made things so real, with such volume and dimension, was something I could begin to relate my own work to—as a goal."

The goal is certainly achieved in *Self-Portrait II*, a compelling image of the artist slouched in the corner of a bare room, naked to the waist, the contours of his body so sharp they seem cut with a knife, the hairs and creases and pores of his flesh all visible to us in breathtaking detail. Yet, as certainly as the exacting technique of the Old Masters is recalled here in the figure's volume and dimension, so does the ascetic figure in its ascetic space equally recall their subject matter, the monks and saints and martyrs of Christian art. Is this, then, a retrograde picture, an effort to project us back to some historic time and place, modern only in a romantic appeal to the artist's marginalized relationship to society and his beleaguered devotion to his trade? I think not, for the figure exudes no aura of exalted or beatific suffering, no longing for a community of like souls. In fact, despite the fact that Gillespie's mesmerizing technique relentlessly sucks us closer to him, as if inviting us to know him, his thoughts and feelings remain veiled from us; we don't know them at all. While we recognize his appearance, while his image would probably allow us to identify him if we passed him on the street, his self is distanced, isolated, separate. In recognizing his separateness from us, we recognize as well our separateness from him and, by extension, our separateness from all others in our world. Stanley Cavell refers to this separateness as the unity of our condition, and its avowal in Gillespie's painting marks undeniably not only his painting's impact but also its modernity.



Self-Portrait

1976-77
oil and magna on wood
panel
30 x 24 inches

New York, New York, Whitney
Museum of American Art, 1979
Whitney Biennial, 1979.
New York, New York, Forum Gallery,
Gregory Gillespie, 1979.
Boston, Massachusetts, Sunne
Savage Gallery,
Another Look at the Figure, 1980
Newport Beach, California, Newport
Harbor Art Museum, *Inside
Out: Self Beyond Likeness*, 1981
(traveled to Portland, Oregon,
Portland Art Museum, Omaha
Nebraska, Joslyn Art Museum,
Waltham, Massachusetts
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis
University, *Herbert W. Collection
of Realist Art*, 1982
Waltham, Massachusetts, Rose Art
Museum, Brandeis University,
*Willam Beckmann and Gregory
Gillespie*, 1984 (catalogue, F. J. C. Belz) cat. no. 17
(traveled to La Jolla, California,
Johan Museum, 1985)

Waltham, Massachusetts, Museum
of Contemporary Art, *Willam
Beckmann and Gregory
Gillespie*, 1985
Fitchburg, Massachusetts, The
Fitchburg Art Museum, *Monet and
Gauguin: An Exhibition: New
England Realist Artists*, 1989
Waltham, Massachusetts, Rose Art
Museum, Brandeis University,
*Body Language: The Figure in the Art
of Our Time*, 1990
New York, New York, Forum Gallery,
*Gregory Gillespie: Twenty-Five Years
of Self-Portrait*, 1992 (illus.)
Boston, Massachusetts, Sunne
Savage Gallery, *Willam Beckmann
and Gregory Gillespie: Willam
Beckmann and Gregory Gillespie*, 1992

Harold Gregor

Here are a few of Harold Gregor's thoughts about the Midwestern landscapes he has been painting for more than 20 years: "When I am painting a landscape, my decisions are concerned with light, metaphorical suggestion, and viewer impact. Early on I realized that my biggest challenge was to address landscape not from a 19th-century viewpoint, but in 20th-century American terms...I wanted the viewer not only to see what I saw but to experience the painting in a way that, when driving in the countryside, the viewer could respond to the scene in terms of art. Anything enjoyed aesthetically gains in value, and if the bountiful agriscene of the Midwest can be seen as intrinsically beautiful, it is more likely to be respected as the wonderfully generative resource that it is."

An American landscape, and what could be more American than the nation's heartland? It's early summer, the few trees we see are foliated, but the corn is just coming up, it won't be knee high until the 4th of July. There's a main house and a gathering of outbuildings, dark red, the way we visualize they should be, and the white fence is battered in sections,

indicating a working farm where something always needs fixing. A late afternoon light rakes across the earth, etching its surface in graphic detail, and then there's the earth itself, unlike any other earth we know, so rich and dark that we can almost smell it. And so flat, as straight and level as the blacktop that runs across the foreground of the image, earth that stretches in every direction, a stable platform on which we can firmly plant our feet and imagine taking root. Landscape paintings can be about many things, about geology or scale or discovery, even about the sky, but this one is about the land we call the Midwest, and Gregor sees it without pretension or sentimentality or drama, not as a metaphor—which is what I think he means in his reference to 19th-century landscapes—but for what it is, a life-giving source.

The artist says he wants his painting to make us think about art when we're driving through the countryside. He wants it to make us see the landscape for its intrinsic beauty. To make art that acknowledges the world while making us see the world differently is a high ambition; it is every artist's dream. The extent to which that ambition is fulfilled is a matter for you personally to determine in your gut response to the art itself, and in that response will be lodged your estimate of the art's quality. Me, I haven't driven through the midwest in many years, but Harold Gregor's picture makes me feel as though I did it yesterday—and that I would like to do it again tomorrow. In the meantime I'm looking out the window at a lovely December twilight raking a frozen New England landscape and thinking Gregor's lesson is also applicable here, despite the distance from Illinois in June.



Illinois Landscape #33

1979
oil and acrylic on canvas
60 x 84 inches

The beach, the place we go for relaxation, and this painting surely addresses that purpose. The figure who greets us in the foreground rests there like an anchor, his hands casually behind his head, his shirt open. Behind him, over the dune on which his chair is set, other figures are scattered, a group of three lying in the sand on the right, a couple lounging on the left, and one seated at the top, none of them eager to move about. Everyone has plenty of space; there will be room for us as well. An overhead sun complies with the restful ambience, casting no active shadows; the tan palette is evenly distributed, avoiding any disruptive hues or shifts of value; and the edge of the dune moves slowly across the scene, a calm formal reminder of why we are there. In this leisurely moment, we understand fully the artist's stated intention: "...[The subjects]...are a scaffolding which serves first to construct a particular kind of space...and secondly to give a sense of realness, a believability that allows the viewer to connect or identify with, and enter, the paintings. Hopefully, the specific nature of the space itself then takes over and carries the experience of the painting...the space itself becomes feeling, becomes the subject matter. The paintings seek to explore this correspondence between space and feeling."

Greg is Greg Heins, a friend of the artist and a highly respected photographer here in the Boston area, so this painting is also a portrait. (I wonder if there's a conceit at work: You make photographs, I make paintings; whose images are more real?) To have one's portrait painted was once an aristocratic tradition, but portraiture is a marginal genre among ambitious artists in our democratic culture, its purpose having been taken over by photography, as evidenced by the fact that we all have an album of portraits dating back to when we started kindergarten. Having a portrait painted today is accordingly felt to be anachronistic. You'll probably respond, as others have responded, that Pop artist Andy Warhol was ambitious, and he did many, many portraits—it has even been suggested that he single-handedly revived the genre in contemporary art—but Warhol is simply the exception that proves the rule, because his portrait paintings are all silkscreened photographs. Still, we continue to see portraits painted by ambitious artists, and we have to account for them. *Greg/Beach* provides the key in that it documents a personal relationship between artist and subject, which is exactly what most portraits are in the art of our time, images of friends or family members or the subject closest to the artist, the self. Warhol proves this rule, too, in being an exception to it; in a famous statement, he said he wanted to be a machine, and a machine he certainly was when it came to his portraits, since anyone who could afford one could have one just by providing him with a photograph of the subject—in other words, he had no personal relationship with any of his subjects.



Greg Baxby

1979
oil on canvas
10 x 84 inches

Alex Katz

Born in 1927, Alex Katz came to artistic maturity during the 1950s. Back then, one of the values we aspired to in presenting ourselves to the world was that of being cool. James Dean and Marlon Brando, for instance, were both cool. Their manner was sometimes hesitant, as if they were conscious of our gaze and wary of being looked at, on stage or before a camera—maybe anywhere—but it was also assured, suggesting inner confidence, being on top of the situation while choosing to hold back from it, and from us as well. The aloofness was cool, lending to their manner an edginess that kept us wanting, an edginess that Alex Katz must have grasped, for it is a characteristic feature of his paintings.

Ada is the artist's wife, and she appears regularly in his pictures, sometimes with him or with their son Vincent, occasionally with both, but most often by herself, as she is here. Whenever she appears, however, you can be sure of one thing: she will be composed and ready to meet her audience, a model of urbane decorum, fully in control, and invariably in style, glamorous even

when casually attired. Just as she is at the moment of this picture, seated in a canvas lawn chair, assertively facing us through her chic sunglasses, her hair informally pulled back yet clearly in order and tied with an elegant silk scarf, her sophisticated presence appropriately complemented by the Superb lily that rises behind her and completes what is indeed a strikingly dignified and superb image. These aspects are all carefully observed and recorded, making Ada seem familiar, and stirring in us the feeling that we might on another occasion have met her. This is surprising in view of Katz's generalized approach to his subject. His drawing is broad and crisp, silhouetting and flattening the figure in its space, and his color is applied in large, even masses that further reduce both subject and setting into schematic shorthand notations. Since we are in fact presented with very few specific details, how can we feel we might have met this person, that she is familiar? What kind of familiarity are we talking about? I think it's like the familiarity we feel in relation to movie stars or professional athletes or public figures we know through the media world, that is, in contexts for which they are always prepared and which are themselves tightly controlled, quick, and two-dimensional. Who could be more familiar than your favorite anchorperson on the local television news? Yet, as Marshall McLuhan first pointed out, when we happen to see such a public person in the unstructured, extended, and three-dimensional world of everyday experience, say, at an art exhibition, we're ironically uncertain if it's actually the person we thought we were so familiar with. Wishing our two worlds to reinforce one another, we cautiously approach, "Excuse me, but aren't you Ada Katz?" Cool.

Provenance

Exhibition History



1967 *Superb L*

1967
oil on canvas
46 x 51 1/2 inches

Michael Mazur

This is the back yard of Michael Mazur's house and the subject of an extensive series of pictures he made in the late 1970s. The image of the tranquil setting is highly appealing, clear light dancing on the trees and shrubs, filtered in some places, direct in others. It must be late spring or early summer, for the greens are fresh and varied, not dusty and muted, as they become in July and August. In any case, it's a splendid day—even a glimpse of the bright sky at the top of the picture confirms that the air is dry and comfortable—and its effects have been carefully observed and accurately recorded. We want to say the painting is a descendant of Impressionism, of artists such as Monet and Renoir, who went directly to nature in order to chronicle as much of its visual richness as the eye could take in. Yet, certain details in the picture keep me from categorizing it that simply. The tree trunk rising full length on the left side of the composition is one of them. It's closer to us than anything else we see, but surprisingly little of its detail is given; it also seems kind of blunt and obtrusive, like a blockade in front of an otherwise inviting and accessible space. And why did the artist bother to paint that sliver of sky and foliage on the

left edge of the tree trunk? It's so small that we initially don't even notice it. There's also the tree in the middle distance, its trunk again summarily treated while the leaves around it are by comparison crisply indicated. In fact, these apparent discrepancies occur throughout the picture; we're constantly moving back and forth, left and right, jumping in and out of focus, seeing some things more sharply than others. Which is what I think the painting is finally about—perception, how we see the world when we're scanning it, pausing momentarily to savor a shape or color, which momentarily causes any nearby shapes and colors to blur. We then move on, not merely through a back yard but through a dense visual field. Space, here, is less a void inflected by tangible things (which is how it was seen in the Renaissance) than a substance that connects those things (which is how it is seen in the modern). That's why modern pictures tend toward flatness; by acknowledging the picture surface as connecting the imaged world, the connective nature of space in the perceived world is in turn acknowledged. And that's where the bluntly positioned tree comes in. It emphatically declares the surface and establishes the fact that we're looking at a painting, its jumpy edges all the while heightening awareness of what that looking process entails. Speaking of the surface, Michael Mazur's technique for grasping these perceptual phenomena should not go unnoticed, for his brush is every bit as sensitive as his eye, able to suggest leaves and light and color with an economy of means, a mark here, a touch of pigment there. The painter at work here is accomplished and confident; we take as much pleasure in the expression of his vision as in the vision itself.

Provenance

Exhibition History



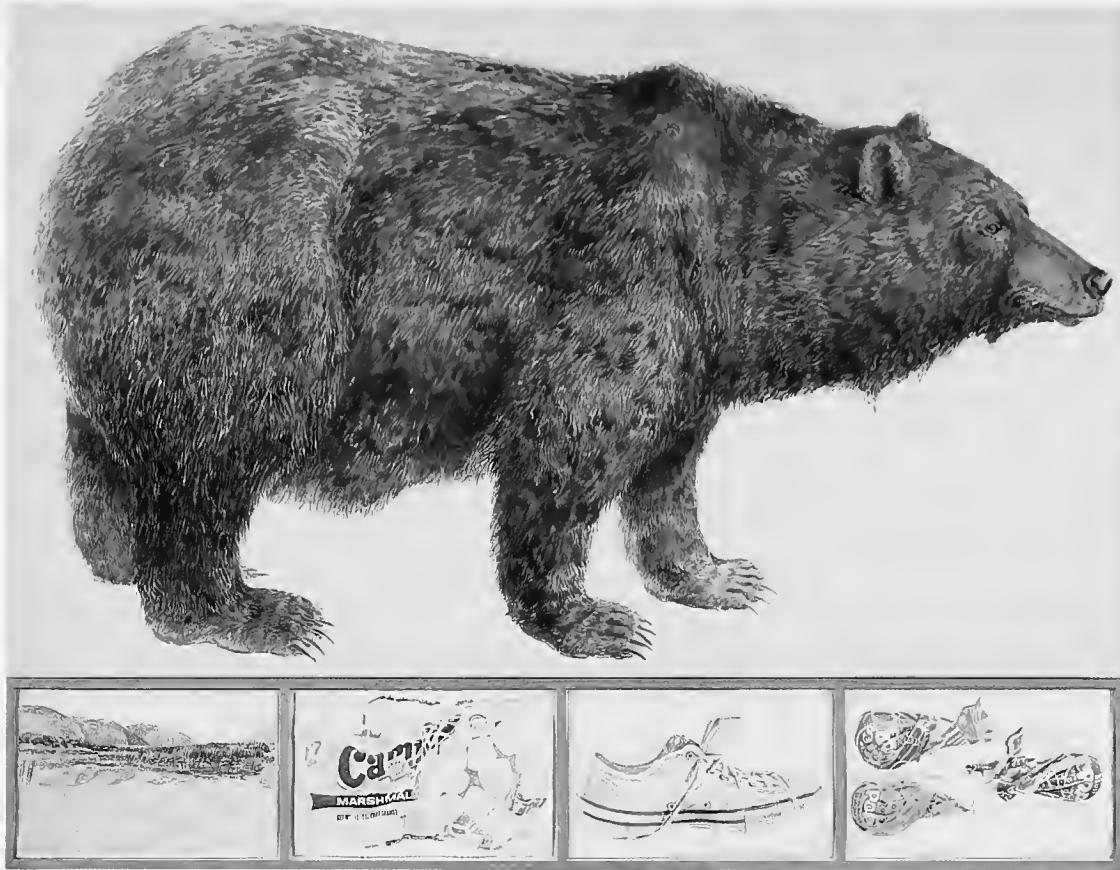
Cambridge Yard #22

1977
oil on canvas
58 x 58¹/₈ inches

Herbert Plimpton was fond of bears in the way others are fond of pigs or frogs or any number of creatures in the Peaceable Kingdom, so it was only natural, given his interest in contemporary realism, that he would acquire this picture by Don Nice, one of our foremost painters of animals. And a wonderful bear it is, its coat rendered in a rich spectrum of browns and oranges and yellows and reds, the colors applied with a lively brush that seems to stroke the beast while in the act of imaging it. Don Nice appears to have enjoyed painting it, as he appears to have enjoyed painting the accompanying predella, a quartet of watercolors depicting lollipops, a tennis shoe, an open bag of marshmallows, and a landscape vista, presumably of the Hudson River Valley signaled in the painting's title. We're children again, back at summer camp, sitting around a campfire telling stories about bears, frightened that we might encounter one. In addressing the picture, we share the artist's pleasure in making it.

But who has ever seen a bear outside the zoo? And what do we know of bears outside the nature shows we see on television? Bears are exotic; they are retreating farther and farther into the wilderness, their species in some cases threatened with extinction. They are becoming memories, like the stories told around campfires—or like nature itself, which we're told has ended. Don Nice knows this. Of his animal paintings, he has said, "...they had interesting aesthetic properties; they were interesting from a formal point of view. They interested me too as 'ideas'...To downplay the illusion of realness I isolated the... [animals]...against a white ground, away from their natural setting, giving them just enough room to exist as shapes. The...[animals]... were abstracted in their truest sense. No shadows. No space. No time. No action. Absolute flatness. Ideas."

Contrary to what some of his critics have suggested, Don Nice's picture is concerned not with environmental issues or nostalgia for an Edenic Peaceable Kingdom now lost, but with nature presented as artifice, as art. In this it subscribes to the postmodernist contention that nature has ended, insofar as it attests accurately to our experience whereby the bear has been replaced by its simulation, mediated for us by the documentary film, distanced from us by the moat at the zoo. Yet, the simulation is not of some particular bear but of the quintessential bear, the bear as an idea, to use the artist's words. In this the picture subscribes to modernism's urge toward pure form. It presents what might be called a Platonic bear, a bear that is the model for all others. Thus poised between the worlds of modernism and postmodernism, this bear is at once real and ideal.



*Bear, Hudson River Series.
American Predella #3*

1975
two panels: acrylic
on canvas; and watercolor
and pencil on paper
73 x 94 inches overall

In a warm appreciation of pictures like this one, John Updike wrote, "One thinks naturally of George Nick's paintings in terms of good conscience and simple truthfulness, of saying instead of judging...Any subject will do, as long as the subject is not exploited for its anecdotal or picturesque qualities but is taken in good conscience as an occasion for pure painting...Rising at dawn to arrive miles distant as a certain slant of morning light befalls a chosen railroad bridge or storefront, he is nature's acolyte; no mere coincidence has brought him to dwell in Emerson and Thoreau's town of Concord..."

Nick always paints from direct observation, driving to each site in a truck that is actually a mobile studio, custom designed with ample heating and windows and a skylight, large enough for him to do a seven-foot picture without having to endure the weather. He didn't need to drive far to observe this motif, but he obviously got there early. Bright sunlight has just hit the storefronts, bringing them vividly to life as the shadows cast by buildings across the empty street recede in our direction. The sky is pure blue, clear and cold

on this 1980 December morning—the artist typically inscribes month and year next to his signature—as still and crisp as the shops themselves in this familiar New England setting that is affectionately rendered in each detail. Good conscience, simple truthfulness, and pure painting, as Updike says, and we need not look beyond what we see in order to secure for the picture additional meaning.

Recently retired, George Nick was for many years a highly respected teacher at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, and he retains to this day a similar respect for his own teacher at the Brooklyn Museum School of Art and the Art Students League, Edwin Dickinson. "Once Dickinson said to me, 'When they bury me I want them to write on my tombstone that I was a painter in oils.' Not anything else—oils. And then he said something else that I was very suspicious of at the time. He said, 'I like to paint. I don't even care if I make a good painting I just like to paint.' I thought he was going senile, but years later I realized that he was being honest. You can't always match your expectations. When you're working everyday it's up and down. Dickinson was trying to stay away from the preciousness of art. He just wanted to keep painting...It's very exciting to do something fresh and new with colors and paint—it's like inventing the light bulb every day." Honesty, something to aspire to, but what does it mean to say a painting is honest? In Nick's case it means sharing without any other agenda the pleasures of his enterprise. It means painting is its own reward. Equally is our response unencumbered, and for that we are grateful. Rooted in New England, Herbert Plimpton felt the same.

Preference

Exhibition History



*Sunny Stores,
Concord, Massachusetts,
December 1980*

1980
oil on linen
40 x 60 inches

David Parrish

We hear periodically that the invention of photography around the middle of the 19th century put painting on the defensive by usurping its depictive function. The camera could image instantly and accurately the details and panorama of the visible world, while painters had to labor to achieve comparable effects. What could painting do? How could it define itself in light of the new technology? That painting began around this same time increasingly to take liberties with the visible world, that is, to become increasingly abstract, is often looked upon as a response to photography's presence: painting needed to stake out territory to which photography did not have access. So the theory goes, but however appealing it may be, it is nonetheless misleading, insofar as painting had already begun to take liberties with the visible world by the time photography was invented. If you look at painting in France and England during the first quarter of the 19th century, at Ingres and Delacroix, for instance, or Constable and Turner, you'll find painting exploring vigorously its character and identity and opening

a path that leads away from straightforward depiction to such an extent that you may wish to turn the theory around and say: As painting abandoned depiction it caused photography to be invented to preserve it. Instead of being put on the defensive, in other words, painting simply found in photography a new visual resource.

Countless painters have utilized photography since its birth more than 150 years ago, though few have done so more overtly than those who became known in the 1970s as photorealists. The term refers to painters who not only work directly from photographs but whose paintings actually resemble them, paintings, that is, whose content is explicitly linked with the medium of photography and our response to it. *Yamaha* is a dazzling example, virtually abstract on first encounter. Polished chrome and glossy enamel blast our senses, while the motorcycle's windscreen and headlight flash everywhere with the crisscrossing reflections of the showroom and the street beyond. The Italian Futurists of the early 20th century are recalled here, their fascination with speed and power, but Parrish's image seems deeply American in its emphasis on the pristine newness of this highway icon, this transcendental machine. Dazzling indeed, but who could ever see all of this cacophonous, fleeting information, and how could it be recorded? In his wildest dreams, even Monet—"Only an eye, but what an eye!"—could not imagine such a feat. Of course Monet did not work from photographs, but he would not in any case have had access to the kind of photograph that David Parrish used in painting *Yamaha*. We begin to comprehend what photorealism is about.

Persistence

Exhibition History



Yamaha

1978
oil on linen
78 x 77 inches

Philip Pearlstein

The female nudes that Philip Pearlstein draws and paints so regularly, regularly cause discomfort among the viewers of his pictures. The figures are seen from odd and unnatural angles, they appear crowded and uncomfortable in the spaces they are made to occupy, and their heads and limbs are often cut off abruptly and arbitrarily by the pictures' framing edges, an unsettling and discordant effect. Unsettling, too, is the light in the pictures. Cold and institutional, it bleaches and hardens the flesh and transforms it into what looks like an arid landscape; coming from multiple directions, it alternately flattens the body or accents its bumpy contours, causing it to appear vaguely grotesque. The figures thus resemble objects in a clinical investigation, merely things in the world, there to be looked at, no different from the chairs they awkwardly rest upon or the rugs on the floor where they recline. So it is in this image; we peer at the model, voyeuristically it seems, for her eyes are closed. She is barely accommodated by the bentwood loveseat, her thighs look paper-thin, her left foot rudely confronts us with its snarl of unseemly blood vessels. Yes, the elegant curves of the loveseat and the delicate floral pattern of the drapery combine to soften the image, but it remains disquieting and puzzling nonetheless. What is the artist up to?

Pearlstein responds to our questions by reminding us that he is concerned above all with the nature of modern experience and its relation to the practice of modernist picture making. With respect to the former, this means he is guided by his perception of the world, that is, by the act of seeing the world unencumbered by received knowledge, discovering on his own and part by part

how it works and what it means to him. How else would he do it? Outside ourselves there is no credible authority to guide us. In terms of the latter, it means ordering his experience within the parameters of painting as many artists have understood them for about the past century and a half, that is, as a flat and delimited surface to which pigments are applied, not a window opening upon the visible world, but a world unto itself that he must structure on his own. Who else would? We no longer have art academies to tell us what makes a picture right. Still, the human figure is central to this enterprise, since it is through the figure—the self in concert with the other—that the visible world and the painted worlds made in response to it are comprehended and measured.

In the 1950s, artists of Pearlstein's generation regularly debated whether painting could any longer accommodate the figure, for the figure is physically three-dimensional, while painting is clearly flat, and the figure inherently implies narration, while painting is clearly not literature. Thus was the expressive viability of the figure questioned, but the figure itself would not go away. It kept reappearing in the work of one painter after another. Nor would Pearlstein let it go away. Dispassionately he studies it, observes it in space and in conjunction with other objects, drains it of the distracting stories it could tell and the self-serving sensuality it could convey, all the while determined to articulate its significance in terms consistent with modern experience and save painting from its loss. In light of such an ambition, it is not surprising that Pearlstein's pictures challenge our conception of the human figure—in their own time, Manet's and Cezanne's did the same.



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Fairfield Porter

New art in our time, in any time for that matter, invariably makes us look at art's past from a new perspective, enabling us to see in it what had previously been obscured, even appreciate as special what had previously seemed routine. In the 1950s, the overall compositions of the Abstract Expressionists resensitized us to the late Monet, and in the following decade, Pop Art's celebration of the commonplace created a fresh awareness of the contribution of Marcel Duchamp. So, too, in the 1970s, a new kind of realist painting based on photographs—photorealism—reawakened our interest in realist painting generally. Of course realism had been around all along, throughout the fifties and sixties as well as before, but in post-World War II America it had never generated the kind of attention that came to it in the seventies. As a result, we looked again, and more carefully, at painters such as Fairfield Porter and found ourselves richly rewarded.

Not that Porter ever really wanted for attention, for he enjoyed regular solo exhibitions in New York and elsewhere throughout the fifties and sixties, and he was respected among his peers not only as a painter but as a critic and writer as well. The situation, rather, was that his art subscribed to neither the expressive urgency of the one decade nor the detached conceptualism of the other. In other words, the values embodied in his art didn't seem central. And what are those? Modestly enough, they consist of the feelings associated with seeing and making, looking at the world and responding to it with brush and pigment, and they everywhere inform this image of the artist's friend and colleague, painter Jane Wilson. In terms of visible reality, the picture is fully convincing—in the figure's calm and welcoming presence, the soft afghan on which she rests her left hand, the warm light that fills her unpretentious space. Equally convincing, at the same time, is the painting as a painting, a glowing symphony of autumnal hues, the paint application liquid and quietly sensuous, the drawing confident, the composition firm. Speaking of Velasquez, one of his early inspirations, Porter once observed, "He leaves things alone. It isn't that he copies nature; he doesn't impose himself upon it. He is open to it rather than wanting to twist it. Let the paint dictate to you." *Jane Wilson in Red* harmoniously bonds nature and art, offering us the best of both worlds without compromising either and reminding us that the values espoused in such paintings are, when the dust stirred by new art movements settles, always central.

Provenance

Exhibition History



Amherst, Massachusetts, World Art
Museum, Amherst College,
*An American Collector: Herbert
W. Plimpton*, 1989.
Naltham, Massachusetts, Rose Art
Museum, Brandeis University,
*Body Language: The Figure in the Art
of Our Time*, 1990.
Sendai, Japan, *American Realism
and Figurative Art: 1955-1990*, 1991
(traveled to Yokohama, Sogo
Museum of Art; Tokushima,
Tokushima Modern Art Museum,
Shiba, Otsu, The Museum of Modern
Art; Kochi, Kochi Prefectural
Museum of Folk Art), cat. no. 13.
illus., p. 70.

Jane Wilson in Red

39

1957
oil on canvas
54 x 42 inches

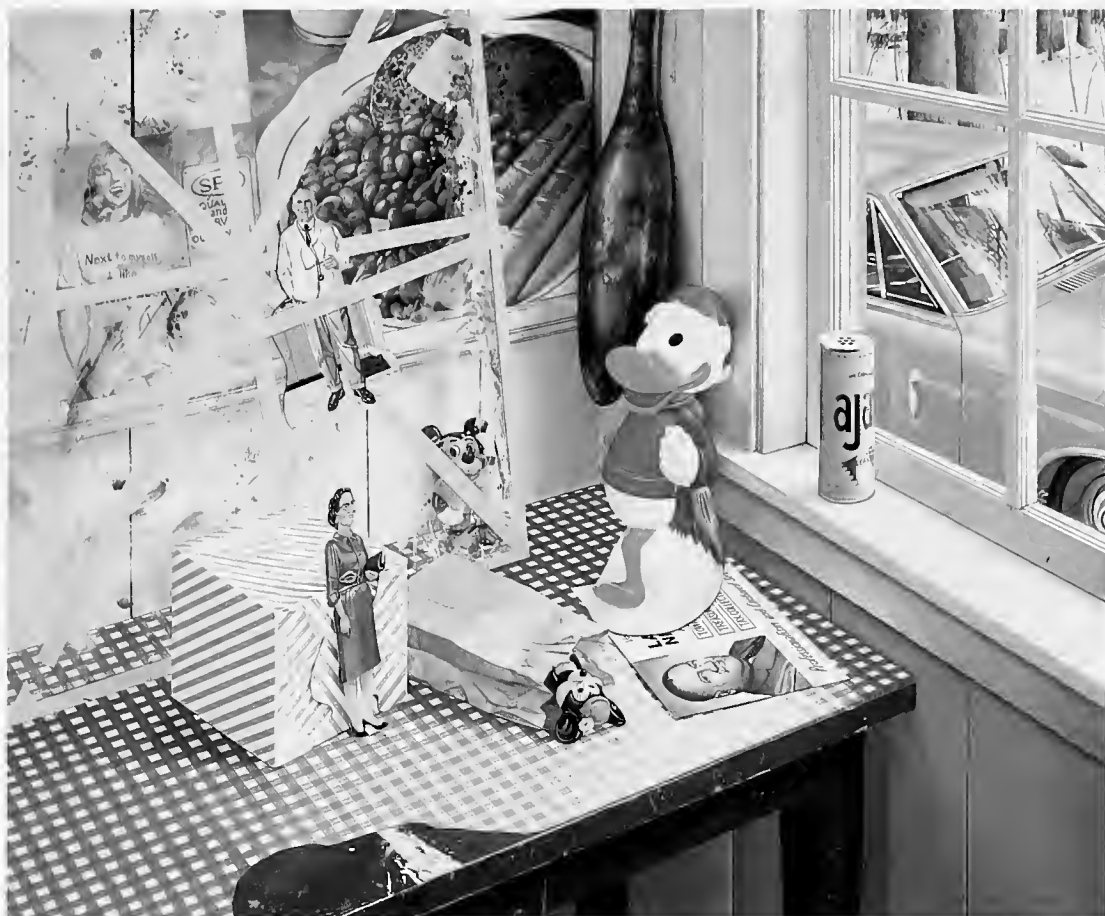
Scott Prior

This still life includes Donald Duck along with Mickey and Minnie Mouse, well known characters in contemporary American folklore. Their prominence here might make us think that Scott Prior evolved his work out of Pop Art and its celebration of comic strips and billboards and other ubiquitous symbols of our lowbrow cultural landscape. Engaging because they are instantly recognizable, the figures certainly lend to the picture an upbeat tone, even a degree of humor—Donald and his friends are always fun to look at. But the still life also includes other objects, and we should probably inventory those before deciding if the painting finally represents an extension of the Pop legacy.

The table on which the figures are placed is covered by a red and white checkered tablecloth, torn in one section, revealing it is made of plastic, like the figures themselves. There's also a gray-and-white-striped gift box with a paper cutout of a smiling middle-aged woman propped against it, a brown lunch bag out of which Minnie spills, and a piece of election mail announcing a candidate for the office of tax collector. At the back of the table stands a sheet of glass, paint splattered and crisscrossed with strips of masking tape that hold a second paper cutout, in this case the image of a smiling middle-aged doctor standing in his office. On the wall behind the glass are two photographic reproductions, one showing a young woman advertising a product whose identity is obscured

by the masking tape, the other, which could also be an ad, displaying a plate of beans and franks and Boston brown bread. In the corner hangs an elongated wooden utensil, its function unknown, and on the windowsill next to the table stands a can of Ajax cleanser. A car is parked outside the window, and beyond the car we catch a glimpse of a snowy landscape.

What, if anything, connects the objects in *Christmas at MacDowell?* We may not know what MacDowell is (it's an artist colony in New Hampshire that Scott Prior has attended on several occasions), but we know what the holiday is, a time for gifts and children, hence the striped box and the new toys and the wintry setting that Bing Crosby annually dreams about on our behalf. As summoned here, however, that dream belongs to another time, to the generation of the doctor and his wife who look like grandparents—surely, they could have appreciated beans and franks and Boston brown bread served on a checkered tablecloth, raised the girl in the ad, bought that old can of Ajax, probably even told us without hesitation the use of that weathered wooden utensil. But they are merely cutout dolls, and stereotypes at that, make believe memories clipped from a magazine about how life used to be, strangers to our plastic world in which even politics intrude (they must be from the 1950s: he has a professional identity, but she is just a wife). And where is the artist in all of this? His presence is felt in the paint-splattered pane of glass, which is his palette and the clouded lens through which much of this still life world is seen. Thus, he joins us in what is finally not a Pop celebration, but a troubled reflection on the fading myth of the American Dream.



Christmas at MacDowell

1979
oil on masonite
38 x 46 inches

Barnet Rubenstein

We see a table with cookie jars standing on a parqueted floor before a wainscotted wall, a still life and setting as friendly as they are familiar, the motif so positioned that we seem to be sitting in front of it, which was the artist's position when he painted it. This represents Barnet Rubenstein's usual approach to picture making. He'll do a series of paintings of cookie jars or cardboard boxes or takeout food containers or grapes or bananas or chrysanthemums, arranging just a few objects for one picture, more for another, maybe moving closer to the motif or backing off from it, depending on the kind of effect he wants, and this in turn imparts variety to each series he executes. His serial method of working is common among abstract artists in our time, the idea being to have one or two elements run from picture to picture, thus providing constants against which we can identify and measure the variables that actually represent what a given series undertakes to explore—and reminding us of scientists who run controls against which their experiments can be gauged. The method originated not with abstraction, however, but with earlier modern art, with Monet, who painted series of haystacks or cathedral facades or poppy fields because he wanted to investigate the light and color surrounding them at different times of the day and different seasons of the year.

And what are Rubenstein's concerns? Given his recognizable subject matter, we probably want to say he leans toward Monet more than the Abstract Expressionists of his own

generation, and we would be right insofar as light and color and quick brushwork surely characterize his picture. And we would be right as well on two additional counts that he told me about when we recently looked at the picture together: first, that while he generally prefers abstract art to realist art, he is personally more comfortable making paintings when he has something to look at; and second, that he was looking hard at several newly cleaned Monet paintings at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts—he has taught at the Museum School for many years—and was deeply impressed with their surfaces and handling at the very moment he was making this one.

But another modern master lurks equally behind *Table with Cookie Jars* and further reveals our painter's concerns, and that is Cezanne, whom Barnet Rubenstein esteems above all others. Those jars clustered tightly together, several the same, others different, turned this way and that, seem massive and proud and monumental, even figurative, their lids like regal caps; and the cookies themselves, such different shapes and sizes and colors, giving off such different tones of light and dark, seem to interact like chattering voices. I'm sure the artist selected the jars and cookies for their formal variety and visual appeal, but the intelligence of his intuitive selections carried him far beyond any urge simply to make a pleasing composition. Like Cezanne's apples, these cookie jars are more than merely ponderable things, for they adumbrate a larger world, perhaps a towering city and its multifaceted community, perhaps the experience of modern society itself. The subject and setting are familiar, but only intimacy with them reveals their deeper significance.

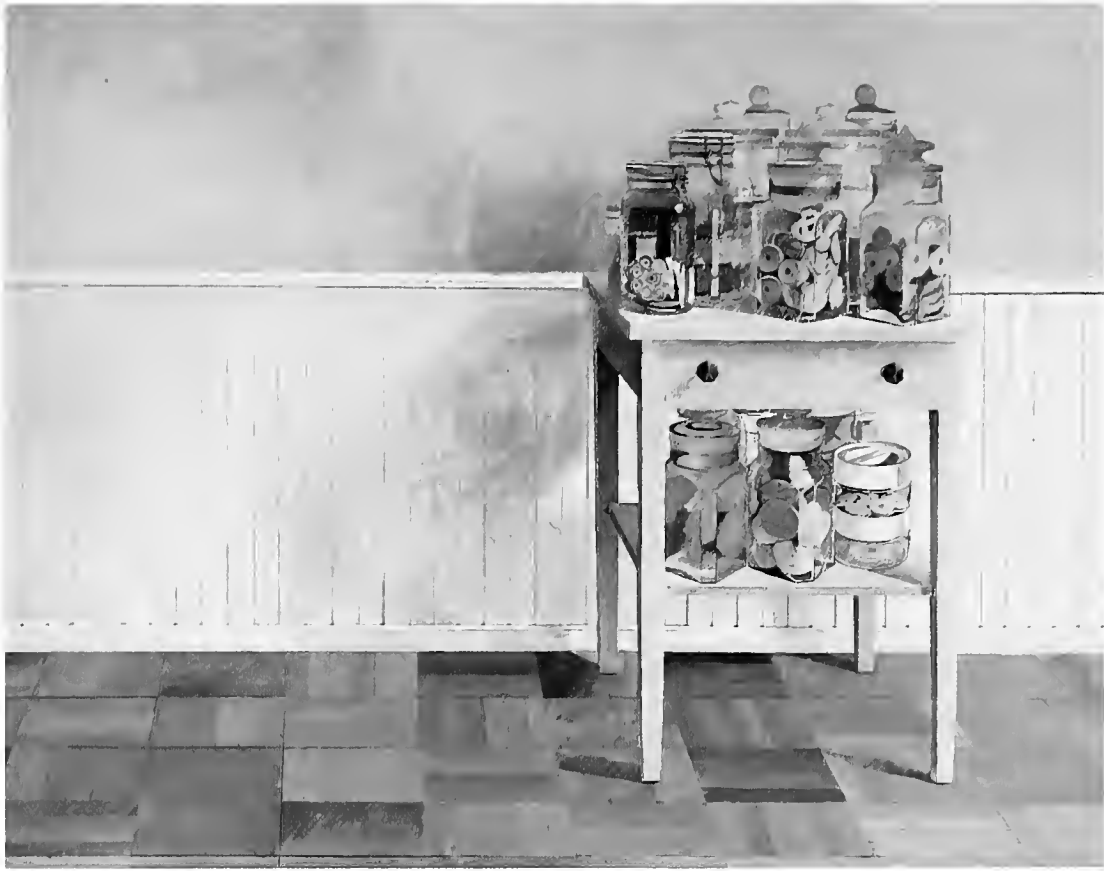


Table and Subject

1898
oil on canvas
34" x 27" (unframed)

This is a pretty bleak image. The lunch room is closed down, its windows boarded up. The Pepsi signs are weathered and dingy. There are graffiti on the wall along with torn posters we can't read, their messages forever lost. It's been awhile since the place hummed with activity, if it ever did. Then there's the car standing in front of the lunch room. It looks like an old Chrysler Newport, a newer model, for sure, than the one my father bought new in 1954—a dependable American car made by a dependable American company, a family car, though not the luxury model; that was the Chrysler New Yorker—but this one has sure seen better days. It's banged up and filthy. Its paint is faded. There's rust around the wheel wells and on the rocker panels. The hubcaps are gone. The tires are probably retreads. Did someone park it there, or was it just abandoned? It's hard to say, just as it's hard to imagine that it ever stood new in a showroom or that it was a vehicle for Saturday night cruising and good-time fun. It must have had another life, maybe several lives, but the pathos of its present condition effaces any past it may once have enjoyed. And finally there's the snow, snow in the city, always dirty, never seeming really to be snow

at all, just some kind of sloppy mess that clogs up the drains and forms deep puddles that make it impossible for you to cross the street, and you ruin your shoes anyway. Talk about the death of the inner city, you've got it here in spades.

When advanced painting jettisoned narration, which was about a century and a half ago, photography was there to rescue it for the visual arts, and with photography it remained, eventually giving rise to pictures that moved, telling their stories in real time. (If you think it's merely coincidental that movies were invented at the very moment when vanguard painting was putting a stake through the heart of narration by eliminating all traces of the visible world and becoming totally nonobjective, then maybe you should think again.) It remained there, that is, as long as painting wanted to go in the direction of pure abstractness in order to define its distinctness from the other arts, from photography, for instance, or literature. But that urge was pronounced dead in the 1960s when painting again embraced all manner of concerns that had previously been discarded from it, including narration. Yet, if you were schooled in modernist reduction and felt an obligation to retain the values of modernist purity, which is how I see the situation of John Salt and other photorealists, how would you go about doing that? Well, you can do it by using a photograph to make a painting that looks like a photograph. Because photographs are flat, they don't violate the flatness of the picture plane that modernism taught you to honor, and because photographs are inherently narrative, you can use them to tell the stories you want your paintings to tell, stories like the one about the car in the snow in front of the lunch room.

Provenance

Exhibition History



Lunch Room

1977
oil on canvas
42¹/₄ x 62³/₄ inches

Paul Sarkisian

The objects comprising Paul Sarkisian's still life are familiar enough, a large envelope lying amidst a cluster of torn and folded paper wrappings piled atop one another, perhaps reminding us of the daily routine of opening the mail. But the presentation is hardly routine, as nothing about it suggests that the papers have been tossed casually onto a kitchen table or into some catchall receptacle, there to be dealt with on another occasion. Rather, they have been carefully, even painstakingly arranged. The green envelope that anchors the composition is squarely placed in the painting's center, the angles of its folds and edges establishing a rhythm for the folds and edges of the papers that are deployed around it, all of them locked securely within the picture's framing edges, all of them flattened against the flat and pristine white field that is their support. So precisely ordered is this world, so unblemished its contents, that it momentarily seems otherworldly, as if these ordinary items have been somehow willed into position without being touched by ordinary human hands.

Sarkisian has here employed an airbrush painting technique that at once enables and complements the magical aura surrounding his still life image while ironically plunging it back to the here and now. Cleansed of any trace of pigment or drawing, each surface, crease, and edge, including each faint shadow, seems to have materialized without human intervention, instead feeling palpably immediate—not depicted at all, but actual. In perplexed response, we question what we're seeing and being asked to believe on the basis of that seeing, wondering if seeing itself is enough, and we accordingly feel the urge to move closer, perhaps touch the papers or, as a final vindication of our challenged eyesight, pry off with a fingernail the small landscape image near the center of the painting that we're convinced must be a postcard collaged to the picture surface. In this moment of frustrated temptation—the signs on the museum wall say Do Not Touch—we're indeed projected into another world, not exactly an otherworldly world, but rather the world of past American art, the world, for instance, of William Michael Harnett and John Frederick Peto, who likewise painted envelopes and scraps of paper attached to walls and shallow niches, creating images we similarly wanted to touch in order to determine what kinds of realities were before us. Thus does Paul Sarkisian extend the long-standing tradition of trompe l'oeil painting into the art of our time, and thus does this particular painting remind us of how our artists have periodically questioned our skepticism with regard to seeing and believing and our corresponding and often contradictory grounding of faith in materiality. For Paul Sarkisian, looking is enough; art by itself is reality.



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As a young man Herbert Plimpton was a stunt pilot and race car driver—formula 1 cars and the European circuit—all of which is pretty exciting to think about in connection with the 1950s when he was doing those things.

Who could forget Jack Kerouac and *On the Road*, the restlessness, the thirst for new experiences, the idea of taking off just for the sake of taking off, seeing America, probably in a car that was a prototype for the old bomber we just looked at in the painting by John Salt? I know I can't, because Kerouac's book had that kind of impact, and Sarah Supplee's picture helps to bring home its memory. We're at the wheel, the open highway stretching out before us, slicing through the granite at the foothills of the White Mountains, curling with sudden acceleration just before it disappears over the horizon. It's twilight, but the sky looks good and the road is clear, just one truck in front of us—there's always a truck or a plodding camper—so we'll log some miles before calling it a day. I don't know if Herbert Plimpton thought about this kind of stuff when he addressed this painting, but I can imagine

him doing so (albeit, in view of his impeccable taste, in something more stylish than an old bomber, something closer to the sports car Grace Kelly drove in the film *To Catch a Thief*).

I can imagine him thinking of other things as well, of other paintings, American paintings of the 19th century (which, we recall, he also collected before turning his attention to contemporary art). The sweeping vistas of Thomas Cole and John Kensett and other members of the Hudson River School come immediately to mind, along with the contemplative Luminist panoramas of Martin Johnson Heade. As in so many of those pictures, we are presented here with an encompassing view of a tranquil landscape under an expansive sky, and a delicate light that caresses the land while drawing us toward its embrace. And we have access to that embrace, in the lake or stream that greets us in the foreground of so many of those older pictures, just as the highway greets us in this one. The greeting makes all the difference, doesn't it? Where we were once on foot or horseback or in a small boat, wending our way slowly, now we're in the car, speeding along, signage guiding us. Which is exactly how we experience nature, isn't it? framed by the car's windows (some of which may be tinted, perhaps to create a Luminist effect), at the pace dictated by the interstate's traffic (Minimum Speed 40), and at the convenience of the interstate's engineers (Scenic Vista 2 Miles) nature carved to meet human needs and kept at a distance. So, Herbert Plimpton might have been thinking about 19th-century pictures when he selected this one for his collection, but his eye was firmly in tune with the present.



New Hampshire, Route 93, I

1978
oil on canvas
44 1/4 x 66 1/2 inches

Horacio Torres

All of the paintings in the Plimpton Collection obviously look different from one another, but this one looks different from the others in a different way. It looks for all intents and purposes as though it was painted not in 1975 but in 1575, in Venice, say, by Titian, or in the manner of Titian, which is the Grand Manner of the classical European tradition. A sculpturesque female nude reclines on a couch surrounded by billowing draperies that echo the model's ample contours and the sensuous tactility of her flesh. The paint handling is also generous, the artist's brush sweeping across the surface, creating dramatic highlights, causing cloth and body to glow with warmth and luminosity. We can imagine music playing, performed there in the studio while the artist painted—just as it was for Titian—sonorous music, authoritative and dignified. We're in another world, a past world, and we accordingly wonder if this painting is simply anachronistic.

Torres's referencing of the Grand Manner is peculiar in that it is so blatantly obvious; there's no way it can be overlooked, certainly not by anyone who is even vaguely familiar with the history of art. This very obviousness is significant,

for it serves as an acknowledgment of our problematic relationship to the Grand Manner and our distancing from it, which in turn means the Grand Manner is not so much an influence on the painting as it is the painting's subject. In its acute self-consciousness, the painting suddenly enters our time, reminding us that in modern experience we are distanced not only from the past or from one another, but from the world at large. Modern, too, are the painting's formal devices: the way the figure's foot is arbitrarily severed by the framing edge; the way her face is turned behind the drapery; the way the pigment is vigorously applied, all reminders that we're looking not at a scene or a story or a fragment of a larger whole, but at a flat and delimited object, a painting, and a self-consciously constructed one at that, a modernist painting.

As it is said that nature has ended, so is it said that modernism has ended and been replaced by postmodernism, a declaration that has caused concern. The formal issues that guided art since the middle of the 19th century are no longer issues. The mandates that formerly defined artistic practice are no longer observed. The tradition whereby each new generation challenged its forebears is no longer honored, and so forth. It seems as though the old systems have broken down, that anything goes, and a loss is felt. Where some feel a loss, however, others feel a gain, and maybe Horacio Torres should be included in that camp. His grasp of modern experience is clear, as is his grasp of modernist painting, but maybe he grasped postmodernism as well—after all, he sent the message that you could paint like Titian.



The Virgin and Child with
St. John the Baptist

1075
Oil on canvas
62 1/2 x 74 inches

James Weeks studied painting at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and joined the faculty there in 1948. His colleagues included Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and Clyfford Still, the latter an especially commanding and influential spokesperson for the new art that flourished in the United States in the postwar years, Abstract Expressionism. Bischoff, Diebenkorn, and Park initially practiced that style before rejecting it in the 1950s in favor of figuration, and in doing so they drew criticism from Still and others who saw Abstract Expressionism as uniquely American in character, unblemished by European precedents, an ideological high road that realism necessarily compromised, not only esthetically, but morally as well. Such was the discourse that surrounded art at the time. It was an all-or-nothing proposition. For his part, Weeks never painted in a fully abstract manner, so he was never accused of abandoning the Abstract Expressionist faith; nonetheless, he certainly experienced the effects of Still's thought, as the following statement indicates: "I was sympathetic to the idea that American painting should be taken seriously,

but I didn't think it had to come out only in the form of Abstract Expressionism, nor that one should turn one's back on French painting completely...The reason I continued to paint figuratively rather than abstractly was that [in figurative painting] I thought I could do both."

Weeks started *Santa Monica, Easter Sunday* when he was living in Southern California and teaching at the University of California at Los Angeles, and he finished it while living in Massachusetts and teaching at Boston University. His initial experience of the glaring Southern California sunlight that drenches his models and their surroundings must have been intense, for its memory seems not to have diminished during the several years he on and off returned to the picture before completing it, nor did it pale through northern exposure. The light dazzles. It feels tangible, the figures seem to wear it. It spreads across the scene like an opulent carpet, animating what is otherwise a balanced and ordered composition. Everything here has its place, the trees and architectural elements and human figures arrayed as verticals and horizontals that grid firmly the picture surface and measure evenly its spatial illusion. The figures themselves are distant and generalized, more types than individuals; they do not engage us or interact with one another. Even the small dog poses erectly. This is a disciplined and stable world, its cerebral calm and monumentality reminding us of classical painting in the European tradition, of the mature Cezanne, of Matisse, and, before both of them, Poussin. In recalling that tradition it demonstrates clearly why James Weeks did not wish to turn his back on French painting.



*Santa Monica Easter
Sunday
(Models on the Terrace)*

1967-73
acrylic on canvas
69³/₄ x 90 inches

All artists are invariably of their time and place, shaped by the culture in which they grow up, taking inspiration from some of its aspects while taking exception to others, but in any case absorbing it and in turn sharing with us their responses to its character. The situation could not be otherwise, for otherwise artistic effort would be inaccessible to its audience; the fruits of its labor would have no meaning. True, we sometimes refer to artists as oracles, endowing them with the ability to look into the future, wanting to see them as larger than life, not confined by their immediate cultural surroundings. Art history writing tends to reinforce this romantic view through its emphasis on artistic styles and their similarities. Thus, when new art shares the look of older art, the old is said to be a prophetic precursor of the new, and this allows art's history to be kept smoothly flowing from then to now and, presumably, beyond. But looks can be deceiving, allowing a misguided sense of how art's history works and what artistic style consists of and, hence, of the meaning of the oft repeated saying, All art comes from art.

Neil Welliver came to art during the 1950s when Abstract Expressionism enjoyed virtual hegemony in the United States and around the globe, and he remains to this day committed to the fundamental concerns that guided painting at that time, as the following statement attests: "The thing about Pollock that excited me, and still does, is accepting the physical fact of the canvas. Acknowledging the fact of the painting. Pollock's

aggression about the fact of the painting and so on. I like that. I feel I come much more from that than I do from anywhere else... [but also from] de Kooning, because there is the development of the image and at the same time an insistence on the fact of the painting. And it's that I would like to have. I want to develop a much more...precise image."

Late Light certainly doesn't look like a painting by Pollock or de Kooning, far from it. It looks like the Maine woods where Welliver lives and walks and works, a fully convincing and precise image of the natural environment he has studied for three decades. At least it looks that way from a distance, which is also the way it looks in this reproduction, like a window opening onto the world. In the flesh, however, it is a very large painting, larger than a person, large enough to preclude seeing it from a distance under most circumstances, which means we more normally see it from close range, not like a window at all but as a physical fact, its surface palpable. At close range, too, we're less aware of rocks and branches and spots of sunlight than we are of paint masses, agitated diagonals, and sheer color. Looks notwithstanding, Pollock and de Kooning would not be strangers here, nor would they be perplexed by the picture's large size, for the Abstract Expressionists routinely made pictures this big. You might think they did so because they were competitive, because they wanted attention, but their reason was quite the opposite. What they sought was to bring you closer, they wanted intimacy, which is also what Neil Welliver wants, to bring you into his world. Art historical kinships rest not on appearances but values.



Late Light

1978
oil on canvas
96 x 96 inches

**Checklist of The
Herbert W. Plimpton
Collection**

Elizabeth Awalt (born 1956)

Cistern Spring, 1986
oil on canvas
63¹/₄ x 80¹/₈ inches

William Bailey (born 1930)

Manfroni Still Life, 1978
oil on canvas
44⁷/₈ x 57¹/₂ inches

Robert Alan Bechtle (born 1932)

Santa Barbara Motel, 1977
oil on canvas
48¹/₈ x 69 inches

William Beckman (born 1942)

Double Nude, 1978
oil on birch panel
59¹/₂ x 55¹/₂ inches

Robert Cottingham (born 1935)

Discount Store, 1970
oil on canvas
78 x 78 inches

George Dombeck (born 1944)

San Francisco Fire Escape Series #3,
1979
watercolor on paper
37¹/₂ x 48¹/₂ inches

Richard Estes (born 1936)

Urban Landscapes No. 2, 1979
portfolio of eight silkscreen prints,
33/100
27¹/₄ x 19⁵/₈ inches each sheet

Linda Etcoff (born 1952)

Still Life with "Chop Suey", 1985
oil on canvas
44 x 60 inches

Oriole Farb Feshbach

Herbert W. Plimpton, 1986
pastel on paper
8 x 6 inches

Janet Fish (born 1938)

Spring Evening, 1977
oil on canvas
44 x 64 inches

**Patricia Tobacco Forrester
(born 1940)**

Third Annual Buckeye, 1977
watercolor on paper
80 x 51¹/₂ inches overall

Jane Freilicher (born 1924)

Marshes, Dunes and Fields, 1977
oil on canvas
70¹/₂ x 72⁵/₈ inches

**Frances Cohen Gillespie (born
1939)**

Penny's Kimono, 1977
oil and wax medium on birch
plywood
60⁷/₄ x 54 inches

Gregory Gillespie (born 1936)

Self Portrait II, 1976-77
oil and magna on wood panel
30 x 24¹/₂ inches

Sidney Goodman (born 1936)

Incinerator, 1975
oil on canvas
45⁵/₈ x 97¹/₂ inches

John Grazier

City Lines, 1978
pencil on paper
7⁷/₈ x 22⁷/₈ inches

Harold Gregor (born 1929)

Illinois Landscape #33, 1979
oil and acrylic on canvas
60 x 84 inches

Nancy Hagin (born 1940)

Blue Floor, 1977
acrylic on canvas
53³/₄ x 68 inches

Susan Heideman (born 1950)

Broken Frond, 1977-78
oil on canvas
66¹/₄ x 47¹/₈ inches

Keith Jacobshagen (born 1941)

Treeline and Flocking Black Birds,
1979
oil on canvas
5³/₈ x 11 inches

Joel Janowitz (born 1945)

Greg/Beach, 1979
oil on canvas
50 x 84 inches

Alex Katz (born 1927)

Ada with Superb Lily, 1967
oil on canvas
46 x 51¹/₂ inches

Gabriel Laderman (born 1929)

West Dover, 1969
oil on canvas
36 x 45 inches

Michael Mazur (born 1925)

Cambridge Yard #22, 1977
oil on canvas
58 x 58¹/₈ inches

Robert S. Neuman (born 1926)

Ship to Paradise, 1977
etching
17³/₈ x 35³/₄ inches

Robert S. Neuman

Ship to Paradise, 1978
watercolor on paper
25¹/₂ x 40¹/₄ inches

Joe Nicastrì

Elise, 1978
pencil on paper
15 x 18¹/₄ inches
Gift of R. Anne McCarthy to the
Herbert W. Plimpton Collection

Don Nice (born 1932)

*Bear, Hudson River Series, American
Predella #3*, 1975
two panels: acrylic on canvas; and
watercolor and pencil on paper
73 x 94 inches overall

George Nick (born 1927)

*Sunny Stores, Concord,
Massachusetts, December 1980*,
1980
oil on linen
40 x 60 inches

David Parrish (born 1939)

Yamaha, 1978
oil on linen
78 x 77 inches

Philip Pearlstein (born 1924)

*Female Model Reclining
on Bentwood Loveseat*, 1974
oil on canvas
48 x 60 inches

Peter Plamondon (born 1939)

Styrofoam Cups, 1981
oil on canvas
52 x 57 inches

Fairfield Porter (1907-1975)

Jane Wilson in Red, ca. 1957
oil on canvas
52 x 42 inches

Fairfield Porter

View of Barred Islands, 1970
oil on canvas
40 x 50 inches

Scott Prior (born 1949)

Christmas at MacDowell, 1979
oil on masonite
38 x 46 inches

Barnet Rubenstein (born 1923)

Table with Cookie Jars, 1977-78
oil on canvas
44¹/₂ x 57 inches

John Salt (born 1937)

Lunch Room, 1977
watercolor on paper
42¹/₄ x 62³/₄ inches

Paul Sarkisian (born 1928)

Untitled #5, 1978
pencil on paper
71¹/₂ x 71¹/₂ inches

Susan Shatter (born 1943)

Ios, Greece, 1974
watercolor and pencil on paper
28¹/₂ x 78 inches

Richard Sheehan (born 1953)

Abbott Lumber, 1980
oil on canvas
30 x 60 inches

Sarah Supplee (born 1941)

New Hampshire, Route 93, I, 1978
oil on canvas
44¹/₄ x 66¹/₈ inches

Horacio Torres (1924-1976)

*Partial Nude on White Cloth, Red
Background*, 1975
oil on canvas
62¹/₄ x 74 inches

James Weeks (born 1922)

Dejeuner, 1977
acrylic on canvas
44¹/₈ x 60 inches

James Weeks

*Santa Monica Easter Sunday (Models
on the Terrace)*, 1967-73
acrylic on canvas
69³/₄ x 90 inches

Neil Welliver (born 1929)

Late Light, 1978
oil on canvas
96 x 96 inches

Neil Welliver

Windfall, 1969
oil on canvas
72¹/₄ x 72¹/₈ inches

John Woolsey (born 1945)

Violet Lake, Wild Foxgloves, Skye,
1978
oil on canvas
44³/₄ x 60 inches

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